

## TRENDS IN VIRTUAL PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN MOVIES: A CASE OF PRODUCT PLACEMENT BETWEEN NASA AND STAR TREK FILMS

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### Abstract

*With a massive boom in technological revolution, traditional product placement has transformed into Virtual Product Placement (VPP), allowing computing software to digitally insert image of a specific product or brand into media content such as movies or television shows in post-production stage. Although in terms of consumer targeting this technique has positively contributed to brands, broadcasters and studio productions but the evolution of virtual technology does not come without legal, marketing or ethical loopholes. This case study is focused on how the Star Trek: Into the Darkness and its image is strongly associated with National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and their vision that utilizes using a particular form of virtual product placement.*

**Keywords:** Virtual Product Placement, Consumer Market, Star Trek, NASA, trespassing, brands, products copyrightinfringement, false endorsement, brand development

### Introduction

As the consumer market has gone more fragmented, advertisers in recent decade have turned their heads towards a variety of different communication channels to reach to the maximum number of customers. One of the promising channels that have been employed considerably in recent years is Product Placement.

Product Placement refers to a paid product message aimed at influencing television or movie audience via planned and discreet insertion of branded products in to the said programs. This concept is not new in domain of advertising and promotion. (Balasubramanian, 1994).

Thus, Virtual Product placement (VPP) is an advertising approach which allows broadcasters to gain control on advertising revenue. The shows are recorded in production studios with placements spots in it. Same shows are licensed and broadcasters sell the placement spots to the advertisers. Further, post-production techniques are applied to populate the placement spots with content.

With growing technological advancements, traditional product placement -namely the placement of physical products into a film, television program or movie– has transformed into VPP, allowing computing software to digitally insert the image of a specific product or brand in post-production stage (McDonnell and Drennan, 2010).

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Product placement already existed before VPP was known widely. In fact, the first ever recorded product placement took place in the famous silent film “Wings” (1927), the first film which won the Academy Award for Best Picture. It contained a plug for Hershey's chocolate. Another memorable example was the box office movie E.T. So, the concept of strategically placing a product in media content and not as a separate advertisement was already invented. However, according to McDonnell and Drennan (2010), the problem with the traditional product placement was that it was really hard to measure the effectiveness of physical placement in certain movie, which may require audience selectivity later on. Considering the fact that brands developed in the U.S may have no or little influence in other parts of the world, VPP is considered a more suitable marketing practice to induce suitable brands for audiences all over the world.

VPP has outshined traditional product placement also due to its inclination towards cost effectiveness and targeted segments. This strategy is also attractive for advertisers due to its countless benefits. Since the product is digitally inserted in the movies or programs, it enables advertisers to target specific audiences according to geographical or other criteria.

Yet, VPP is not still evolved to a degree that it would enable it to substitute all other publicity or advertising techniques completely.

This paper tries to elaborate on various perceptions that revolve around VPP, its usage and the consequent misconceptions that stem from these different definitions, as well as explore alternative ways for brands, broadcasters and studio productions to overcome these loopholes while using VPP.

## **Virtual Product Placement and Its Theoretical Background**

Reichman and Moreland (2006) present VPP as a form of virtual advertising that generally refers to insertion of different computer-generated-images including brand names, products, and animation into a live or recorded television programs or movies. An example to quote is from Major League Baseball, where virtual advertisements have been digitally inserted behind home plate so that the home audience can see the advertisements. Thus, those in the baseball stadium only see a green board behind the batter, while the television audience views the advertisement. This favors fans in the stadium by eradicating distracting advertisements on the baseball field while adding a revenue stream to the broadcasters of the event. However, there are certain points that differentiate VPP from both product placement and advertisements as far as its primary purposes are concerned.

Hey (2000) differentiates VPP from traditional product placement due to the manipulation that allows advertisers to virtually insert the brands of their choice in a particular movie or show, even after shooting it. Thus, it does not require re-shooting the entire scene to insert different brands, which eventually saves a lot of money as well.

It also must be noted the main concept of VPP is not about advertising, since the main purpose is not to directly increase the sales. Rather, it manipulates the audience's unconsciousness by digitally inserting the product. The reason is that, if done properly, this method creates a naturalization effect towards the nature of the whole movie and the product itself, by making the impression that the product is a part of the movie. Therefore, depending on the

case, the product will then be associated with either a persona (the actor/actress), or even the movie itself and a stronger brand image will be planted. Ultimately, VPP is about associating one brand with a certain celebrity, show or movie; “With product placement, there isn’t a literal message to buy the product. It’s rather an association with setting/celebrity that viewers find it appealing.”

Reardon, Miller, Vida & Kim as cited in McDonnell and Drennan (2010) suggested that VPP may be a method to evaluate the effect of single placement and its value, as well as a component integrated campaign for new products. However, it must be kept in mind to use VPP technology quite accordingly and appropriately and the product should be inserted in a way that it makes sense to viewers. As Hey (2000) puts it, “If advertisements are placed virtually, they must be placed in a way that makes sense to the plot and character world... If a product is placed in an ‘unnatural’ way... viewers will get offended and stop watching” (p. 114-115).

Virtual advertisements may not be elucidating traditional commercials from the mainstream media but they can still serve as a major source of revenue for the broadcasting industry. These advertising “Slots” can be sold by producers and studios on various mediums of the show. For instance, a company can sell advertising space for an original first-run series and offer different advertising space for subsequent releases. Consequently, those who buy a DVD of a movie may see a different virtual advertisement than to those who enjoy the same movie in theatre halls.

## **Related Work**

Once the possibilities of revenue increase through the VPP flexibility became apparent, advertisers and researchers alike became interested in various marketing aspects of this new technology. As the existing literature suggests, with the evolution of virtual technology some problems that did not exist in the traditional product placement method are aroused, a certain legal and marketing regulations –unprepared for the technological innovations– remain unsettled. The current state of research on how to overcome the legal, marketing (Reichman and Moreland, 2006) and ethical aspects (Brown, Almond, 2007) that result from virtual technology is still on its infancy level. Still, the nature of the problems is presented clearly and precisely.

Reichman and Moreland (2006) indicate the legal issue of *trespassing* that arises when a network allows a company to place its virtual advertisement over a physical one. In this case, the stake holders are not only the companies that had paid to have their physical advertisement placed and they lose their money’s worth, but also the companies that own and sell the physical advertising space. An example of this case was a 2002 lawsuit filed by OTS Signs, owner and seller of billboard spaces, against Sony Corporation and others alleging deceptive trade practices & trespass and violation of federal and state unfair competition. The lawsuit alleged that Samsung advertisement was replaced by a billboard for USA Today and that a 45-foot high by 40-foot wide Samsung billboard was digitally erased and replaced it with a virtual advertisement promoting Cingular Wireless. This case was preceded to the second circuit which found that the case presented an uncertain and unsettled question of New York State law; whether a trespass is committed when a party’s physical contact with another party’s personal property without physically damaging it diminishes the

value of that property. This way, it is clear that there is a legal gap in the regulation of virtual advertising and consequently, VPP.

Another unsettled matter is the *copyright infringement*. As a general matter, copyright infringement occurs when a copyrighted work is reproduced, distributed, performed, publicly displayed, or made in to a derivative work without the permission of the copyright to owner. <sup>1</sup>Reichman and Moreland (2006) observe that in cases of virtual advertising, the original content that is broadcasted (e.g. films, TV shows) is inevitably altered to screen new advertisements in it. If these products are substituted without the prior consent of the copyright owners, then there could be a viable copyright claim from them.

Traditional product placement has been used in television shows and films to the knowledge of consumers and actors alike(Almond,2007). VPP, however, mostly takes places in the post production phase. As a result, viewers and actors may not be aware of its occurrence. Therefore, actors may find themselves endorsing a product in scenes where there was initially another firm or even no product at all. As a consequence, actors may claim that a firm's use of VPP has violated their right of publicity. However, according to Almond, (2007) actors currently enjoy no moral rights protection in the United States, as the doctrine of Copyright Act states the copyright in an actor's performance belongs to television studios and not actors themselves (Almond, 2007;627).

Similarly, as television networks and the film industry adopt new advertising models, it is questionable whether VPP may *affect the content of the scripts*. Script writers and directors may tend to formulate their stories in a way that will enable them to use VPP easier and may reject program ideas that do not easily accommodate marketing. However, this may not be accepted by viewers and lead to opposite results; Gutnik, Huang, Lin and Schmidt (2007) refer to the example of the film *Fantastic Four* that caused ad resentment from movie reviewers for blatant product placement. The criticism was that superfluous product placement detracted viewers from the film plot.

Finally, another controversial aspect is the ethical question of whether VPP is *deceptive effort* or not as it takes advantage of the viewers' belief that a broadcast reflects the reality being shot—with the exception of the cases of special effects—but with the use of VPP the image is changed not for the scenario purposes but for commercial ones (Horovitz, 2000 as cited by Brown).

One possible reason behind the various aspects of VPP that need to be regulated is the different conceptualization of the technique by the different parts of the media industry. The limited existing literature on the legal and marketing legitimization of VPP simply refers to the challenges but without suggestions on possible solutions. This paper tries to answer a series of questions related to these aspects:

Q1: How can a Virtual Product Placement occur in a movie or television show without trespassing physical advertisements or copyright infringement?

Q2: How can a Virtual Product Placement in a movie or television show occur without raising claims of false endorsement from the actors 'side?

Q3: How can a Virtual Product Placement in a movie of television show occur without infiltrating the show's script or raise ambiguity in the viewers about whether they are being deceived by the image of the product?

A case study of a successful but rather particular connection of a brand with a film will be presented and analyzed with respect to the research questions.

### **CASE STUDY; STAR TREK: INTO THE DARKNESS**

This case is focused on how the *Star Trek: Into the Darkness* and its image is strongly associated with NASA and their vision. This will scrutinize how the relationship affects the general implications of VPP in the movie, and analyze it further.

### **The Misleading Conceptualization of VPP**

Several loopholes of VPP conceptualization have been discussed theoretically, and now other misconceptions will be followed such as the implications during the implementation. In connection with the theoretical concept towards the case study proposed, there are some aspects that need to be highlighted.

First of all, it is essential to recall the definition of the basic concept of VPP, which is associating the product with certain persona/celebrities, movies or others (Hey, 2000). It is therefore, also important to note that this is basically the general concept between Star Trek cinema movies and NASA. This definition eventually explains that the general understanding regarding VPP is actually misleading, since VPP is merely simplified as a distinctive form of advertising. Though, on certain dimension, VPP could be regarded as a part of strategic marketing, thus a unique way of advertising a product by digitally inserting a product into a movie or TV show after the production process is done (McDonnell, Drennan, 2010). Secondly, *Star Trek: into The Darkness* is therefore considerably a fruitful example to be examined in a simple case study, since it contains answers to the aspects discussed previously, despite the differences in implications that we will examine further.

### **Star Trek and NASA Relationship**

Since 1976, the mutual relationship between the spaceship travel that has been highly enhanced in the movie and NASA's future vision has been built slowly but firmly. That year, the relationship is clearly reflected from NASA's promotion that involved the whole Star Trek cast, including the infamous Leonard Nimoy. NASA's first space shuttle, the Enterprise, was also claimed to be named after the fictional starship on Star Trek, in response to a fans' campaign. The shuttlecraft, which originally was named Galileo, was claimed as the core of the space program. Galileo itself was a full-size prop spaceship which was used for filming the original Star Trek series aired in 1966. The spaceship itself is being displayed at NASA's visitor center, Johnson Space. This is a living proof of both parties' mutualism. Nevertheless, it is then crucial to question the reason behind the relationship. The reason is simple, both

Star Trek and NASA share the same vision. They both carry the vision of humankind, both executed in space. Therefore, it would be very arguable to state that this is the main factor of the strong association, especially later on in the last Star Trek movie aired in 2013.

Although associating NASA to a movie/TV episode could be risky since NASA represents a very strong scientific background, whereas contrariwise Star Trek is indeed a science fiction. However, the results were rather surprising. NASA has run several scientific researches to answer publicly on their official website, with detailed explanation of each sci-fi technology that exists in Star Trek right from the communicator, the ship's computer-antimatter, engines, androids, tricorders, and artificial gravity to the warp interstellar drive. Contrariwise, they also note some scientific errors in the movie, but they note it as a "writer novelty" since none of the writers was equipped with scientific background. Therefore, NASA's scientific credibility that was lent to the movie rather enhanced its status among the movie's viewers and fans, even those would not have relevant background. One could notice that this point answers the problem of whether firms may *affect the content of the movie script*. The answer is simply that in this case NASA involvement rather enhances the credibility of the script than lead it to a negative direction.

David Allan Batchelor from the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center stated that Star Trek is an entertaining formulation of real science and imagery science with novelty. The real science itself is a form of effort of faithfulness to humanity's greatest achievement. The movie itself is crafted with such respect of real science and intelligent writing, which is why it is the only science fiction that many scientists watch regularly. Batchelor's statement made it clear that the long-term relationship between Star Trek and NASA has grown as a dream vision of both, in this case, especially for NASA. One of the clearest examples how this formulation continues through the ages is in the screenplay of *Star Trek: Into the Darkness*.

Correlating is the keyword in the whole concept. First of all, since the relationship had already been created decades ago, the correlation most likely would be much easier to fabricate and sustain, even though the NASA logo is not displayed in the movie. Naturally, a NASA logo would not serve the purpose of the movie scenario. Yet, because of the well-known establishment between the two brand names, it is clear to viewers that the equipment models have the NASA origin. Therefore, the problem of *false endorsement* is also answered since actors and viewers alike are aware of the brand name behind the film, even though, paradoxically, it is absent from the script and pictures. Moreover, the fact that the NASA logo is nowhere to be seen automatically solves any legal allegations of *trespassing* of physical advertisements.

Secondly, in US cinemas, The Aerospace Industries Association (AIA) screened a 30-second trailer about their future vision regarding space travel. This trailer was a cut from a three-minute video that had been released by NASA earlier in 2012. The purpose was to enhance further the association of NASA and the space travel, a crucial part of the movie. They described it as "the mission for humanity". Since this trailer was an integral part of the movie screening, even though not included in the scenario and because only the US audience was targeted, it is logical to assume that this act was a continuation of the brand association between NASA and Star Trek films. In addition, since

this there was no unauthorized altering of copyrighted work in this trailer, there was no *copyright infringement* to begin with.

Directly afterwards, the movie was played, displaying the sci-fi technology and the warp effect which is also described as one of “the future dream” of NASA. Currently NASA stated that according to their research, the warp stellar effect is not possible to be manifested under the current knowledge of law physics, but they are still “proposing the dream” by undertaking the research further. So basically, in one dimension, it is rather a reversed VPP, since the idea of the product itself exists, even though is still under research. Furthermore, it also exists in the movie, and most importantly, it is indeed created digitally. Once again, it is just about a very strong correlation effect.

## **Limitations**

To begin with, normally the purpose of VPP is to associate a commercial brand name with certain media content, which is not quite the case with NASA; its mission directorates deal with astronautics research, human exploration and operations, science and space technology. So, the purpose of VPP in this context is not quite commercial, rather than to gain public interest. Movie fans endorse NASA through the interest generated via Star Trek films. Any other commercial brand would probably find it hard to place (traditionally or virtually) its product without its logo in a movie and still manage to have the same positive recognition and publicity results.

Moreover, the correlation between the two brand names has existed throughout decades through a long-term cooperation, stemming from the shared principles among the parties involved. The VPP was just an example of how this relationship was evolved during the years, using contemporary technological innovations. Modern marketing and advertisement, however, do not necessarily aim for establishing a long-term correlation between a brand and certain media (one of the few exceptions may be the James Bond films and Aston Martin or Martini). The important thing is that partially the success of this correlation lies in its stability through time.

## **Conclusion**

While being integrated into movie, since VPP changed the nature of the product itself, it is getting harder to define VPP in many contexts. By being inserted in a movie, VPP then is not just about associating a product anymore. It then involves the persona, the movie, and the product itself. The nature of the whole complexity, therefore, tends to be very delicate and very contextual. In some cases, the outcome could turn to the extent that VPP itself is even hard to define. The movie *Star Trek: Into the Darkness* is a very good case that explains the complexity. For instance, the movie will perhaps be played off-screen, such as DVD release or TV broadcast after a certain time span, there is a specific effect that only occur during on-screen play in cinema. The crucial reason is the high possibility that certain virtual advertisement or even its complementary will only be included while being played in the cinema. This means, it will not be reached by the off-screen audiences.

Drawing back to the theoretical concept, the movie itself is a CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) technology product, which actually cause a slower editing process due to the complexity, which combined live action footage

with computer generated image. Thus, in a matter of fact it also became less critical and harder to identify it as a separate part of the production (Creeber & Martin, 2009). So in the case of technology turn, VPP is not the only one in this case. Once again, in case of science fiction movie and the use of CGI are inseparable. One could imagine the probability of creating current sci-fi movie without CGI is low. Thus, in order to scrutinize the existence of VPP in a movie with CGI, one should not skip the fact and effect of the CGI itself before driving further.

In the case of VPP in *Star Trek: Into the Darkness*, however the case is rather an exception. As discussed earlier, several problems occur as an implication of VPP. Contrariwise, the relationship between Star Trek and NASA shuts down the cases, despite the further implication by causing confusion of the term “post-production”. By having a long term correlation, the brand image of NASA is firmly planted in the image of Star Trek, no matter which episode or series it is. Therefore, NASA doesn’t even need to put any of their logo in the movie, thus despite of the reverse product placement being conducted, even with the complementary 30 seconds ad, the nature of the movie itself remains as it is. Same reason applies to other cases: trespassing, copyright infringement, false endorsement, and movie script.

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